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AUTHOR Koetting, J. Randall
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ABSTRACT

This document supports the following positions on building community: (1) as a society, there is a lack of a conceptual framework to engage in moral discourse, and a lack of a clear understanding of the notion of democracy; and (2) to build "real" community requires a means to engage in moral discourse, a clear understanding of democracy, and a radical and critical praxis. The discussion includes the following points: establishing the need for a moral discourse, presenting initial ideas for an understanding of democracy, and offering insight into the notion of radical and critical praxis that will provide the possibility of building community. School responses to changing notions of democracy have created different programs of reform. Because of the inability to engage in moral dialogue with society, it is increasingly difficult to clarify, debate, or act on visions of democracy. The inability to use moral language sensibly has been attributed to forms of academic theorizing. Democracy and community should be linked to a set of values, and these values must be more than abstract principles. Contains seven references. (AEF)

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Title:

BUILDING COMMUNITY: DEMOCRACY, DISCOURSE, AND PRAXIS

Author:

J. Randall Koetting
Associate Professor
University of Nevada
Department of Curriculum & Instruction
Education Building/278
Reno, NV 89557-0029

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A Working Paper for the Research and Theory Division Symposium 12th Open Forum on Foundational Issues

BUILDING COMMUNITY: DEMOCRACY, DISCOURSE, AND PRAXIS

There are two positions I want to take regarding this symposium:

1. As a society we lack a conceptual framework to engage in moral discourse, and we lack clear understanding of the notion of democracy; and,
2. To build "real" community (as opposed to "virtual" community) requires a means to engage each other in moral discourse; a clear understanding of the notion of democracy; and a radical and critical praxis.

I have ten minutes in which to establish these positions. Consequently, these remarks will be broad, not detailed. These remarks are meant to engage us in conversation. I am not playing "devil's advocate" here, rather I am looking for conversation that will push us into areas that we can explore toward building community. My interest is in building community where we are. This is particularly true for me as an educator within an institutional setting that at times seems to be at odds with building a democratic, participatory community.

These two positions are inter-related so I will develop them together. My discussion should include the following points: establishing the need for a moral discourse; presenting initial ideas for an understanding of democracy; and offering some insight into the notion of radical and critical praxis that will provide the possibility for building community.

Traditionally, schools have been involved/concerned with the notion of democratic ideals and practices. Thomas Jefferson had specific proposals for schools in Virginia; Horace Mann proposed specific reform through common schools; more recently, "A Nation at Risk" (1983) proposed reform measures because the schools were failing in their mission of fostering strong "products" to maintain the economy and the "American-Way of Life".

Historically, the notion of democracy has changed over the years. How we talk about democracy has changed. School responses to these changing notions of democracy have created different programs of reform, e.g., desegregation of schools, Head Start, regaining "lost economic and military ground". (see Beyer, 1988). The shifting notions of democracy result in multiple responses that are sometimes contradictory. There is no one vision of democracy; visions of democracy have "competing interests" as well as differing notions of "social justice"; and because of our inability to engage in moral dialogue within society (especially within schools), it is increasingly difficult to clarify, debate or act on these visions, much less develop historical understanding. This inability of society (and the "schools") to provide a forum for the open discussion of these visions of democratic ideas results from

> ...a loss of communities within which such discourse can become meaningful and prompt the requisite social action. Surrounded by larger institutional structures favoring technization, commodification, and the therapeutic privatization of social relations, we have all but lost a sense of the collective social good so necessary for discussion of democratic ideas (Beyer, 1988, p.221).

Beyer (1988) argues that we have "lost the ability to use moral language sensibly". Quoting Alasdair MacIntyre:

> what we possess ... are the fragments of a conceptual scheme, parts which now lack those contexts from which their significance derived. We possess indeed simualcra of morality, we continue to use many of the key expressions. But we have- very largely, if not entirely- lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality (Beyer, 1988, p.223).

Beyer (1988) attributes the inability to use moral language sensibly to forms of academic theorizing that have "weakened the authenticity and potency of moral discourse" (p.223). He discusses three such forms: First, conceptual analysis in philosophy which tends to separate moral debate from social context. (1)

Secondly, a position of "epistemological and ontological" dualism with a commitment to certitude through forms of empirical investigation. The dualism "inherent in positivistic endeavors demeans the viability of moral judgments" (p.225).(2) And, third, the university research community, as a community of scholars involved in the "conservation, development, and dissemination" of our cultural heritage, shifted their allegiance, becoming more closely allied with "social and governmental agencies, and responsive to the demands of the growing corporate sector". This had the effect of further separating moral discourse from "the production of knowledge", which production happened within increasingly narrow disciplines and sub-disciplines, while moral inquiry belonged to one area of academic inquiry (p.225).

Purpel (1993) sees the need for a moral discourse within society generally, but within education specifically. He identifies a dangerous chasm between "mainstream educational discourse and the urgent social, political, and moral crises of our time" (p.278). Public debate both within and without education seems to center on technical (as opposed to critical) issues. He suggests that this technical, instrumental educational discourse focused on technical issues should be of concern to all those who believe education offers possibilities for hope toward overcoming the many current problems of society. Schools have a role to play, but not the role.

This form of educational discourse focuses on "ameliorating" the existing system, seeing it as something to be fixed or "fine-tuned" but not something to be transformed. Yet the urgent social, political, and moral crises of our time demand more than fixing/fine-tuning. These crises demand engaging in a moral discourse. Moral discourse for Purpel means not only "moral analysis", but also the task "must include forging a moral vision- one that can inform and energize our political will and educational strategy" (Purpel, 1993, p.282). This "moral vision" includes confronting "painful and anguishing dimensions of current educational practice" (p.282). (3) The moral vision must include "the problematics and limitations of the various reforms and critiques that range from criticisms of teachers working conditions and ways to basic curriculum reform" (p.282).

Purpel (1993) acknowledges the fragmentation and isolation that indicates a crisis in community, but rejects the notion of a "common knowledge" that binds people together. Rather we need to "forge a greater share of community through a common moral vision" (p.283).

At this point I need to present a notion of democracy and community that reflects my position.

TOWARD A NOTION OF DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION

I will identify features of democracy that will outline my position:

1. Democracy must be linked to a set of values regarding such issues as social justice, the common good, equality, freedom, community. These terms embody those broad problematic areas that sometimes go by the name of the "American Creed", or the "American Ideology". Hence, to act democratically means to be guided by, to be informed by, that set of values.

These issues are problematic. To inquire into these issues requires a commitment to moral discourse.

2. These values must be more than abstract principles, more than intellectual pursuits, but again, they inform our work. Thus, there needs to be some involvement with the "political" notion of "civic education".

This notion of democracy cannot be a-historical. As Giroux (1988) states, "Democracy is a 'site' of struggle and as social practice is informed by competing ideological conceptions of power, politics, and community" (pp.28-29). To develop a language of citizenship and democracy requires examination of the "horizontal ties between citizen and citizen". Here we are concerned with the notion of difference wherein the demands, cultures, and social relations of different groups must be recognized as part of understanding what it means to be a pluralistic society (cf Giroux, 1988, p.30). Thus "difference and identity" must be central to any debate regarding democracy and politics. This means that "theories of difference" are not only concerned with representation of identities (how the "Other" is represented), but also must be concerned with issues regarding relations of power (Giroux, 1994, p.58).

Identity here must be seen as "...the effect of social struggles between different communities over issues of representation, the distribution of material resources, and the practice of social justice" (Giroux, 1994, p.61). This understanding of identity exemplifies what is meant by democracy as a site of struggle.

What this means for education is that it is not enough to read the texts of the "Other". Wanting to know the Other, according to Hazel Carby "... cannot replace the desire to challenge existing frameworks of segregation". She pointedly asks: "Have we, as a society, successfully eliminated the need for achieving integration through political agitation for civil rights, and opted instead for knowing each other through cultural texts?" (quoted in Giroux, 1994, p.59).

This again points to the political notion of citizenship. For educators this means developing that set of values mentioned above that will inform our work.

The challenge for educators is how "to expand the basis for dialogue and community without erasing a politics of difference" (Giroux, 1994, p.59). Weeks states

> We may not be able to find, indeed we should not seek, a single way of life that would satisfy us all. That does not mean that we cannot agree on common political ends: the construction of what can best be described as a "community of communities", to achieve a maximum political unity without denying difference (quoted in Giroux, 1994, p.59).

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

I would like to conclude with a final comment on the notion of democracy being a site of struggle. Given the complexity of our society today, the global economy, our national economic outlook, legislation favoring corporate interests, minimum wage employment fueled by a service economy and the demise of the middle class in terms of living wages and loss of industry, the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer and growing in numbers, the backlash against multiculturalism through a discourse of what Giroux (1994) calls "imaginary unities of common culture and national identity" (p.57; also cf Schlesinger, 1993), etc., these complexities exemplify what is meant by democracy being a site of struggle.

Recognizing that text-based media can become the basis for our public discourse and can help shape that discourse, we cannot confuse our creating and receiving texts through our keyboards with the struggle for democracy. Democracy is fought for face to face. Democracy is fought for over specific issues. The struggle for democracy is local, as local and specific as our workplace.

Noam Chomsky, in a recent interview (1994), was asked for tangible things for people to do to try to change the world. His response was

> I try to keep it in the back of my mind and think about it, but I'm afraid that the answer is always the same. There is only one way to deal with these things. Being alone, you can't do anything. All you can do is deplore the situation. But, if you join with other people, you can make changes. Millions of things are possible, depending on where you want to put your efforts (pp.105-106).

As Chomsky suggests here, and as I have tried to argue in this paper, it is in community, in the company of others, where our sites of struggle can make a critical difference.

ENDNOTES

1. This has to do with looking at "ideal types" which have the essential characteristics of the issue under discussion (e.g. notions of freedom, social justice, etc.). This form of conceptual analysis looks for refinement and analysis of word use/meaning in particular situations to clarify meaning. The end is to be more precise in what a term means, in order to identify and correct ambiguous or incorrect usage (cf Beyer,1988).

2. Here Beyer is referencing the over-reliance on positivistic forms of inquiry (empirical science) which claims objectivity, value neutrality, and an atheoretical stance. Within such a position "knowledge is to be found precisely by separating our observations and analyses from that untrustworthy social context from which, as Plato surmised, only opinion can spring" (Beyer, 1988, p.225).

3. Purpel (1994) is quite specific here regarding the "painful and anguishing dimensions of current educational practice", and is worth quoting at length:

> Teachers are caught up in a system in which individual achievement, competition, success and aggressiveness are essential and central elements. It is a system in which education becomes an instrument in legitimizing and defining hierarchy; in which schools are a site where people are sorted, graded, classified, and labeled, hence giving credence to the tacit social value that dignity is to be earned. Teachers are asked to prepare students differently- some are to be given the encouragement and skills to be leaders, whereas others are taught to endure their indignities quietly and proudly. It is a system that helps sustain and legitimize a society reveling in consumerism, jingoism, hedonism, greed, and hierarchy" (p.282).

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